

# The Gordon Conferences—R. I. P. ?

## Editorial

Until the late '80s, the Gordon Research Conferences were regarded as the premier research meetings in biology, but their prestige has declined rapidly in recent years. The unique position occupied by the Gordon Conferences in American (and indeed international) science makes this decline a matter of concern to the entire community. What is the cause of the problem, and what can be done about it?

The difficulties began with the enforcement of a policy to restrict the number of speakers. A Gordon Conference used to consist of ~120 participants of whom close to half might be speakers. This format had several beneficial consequences. Most obviously it meant that a great amount of new data was reported. It also brought together a critical mass of people with experience, in fact, a sufficient mass that other researchers of equivalent seniority would attend even though they had not been invited to speak. One of the most attractive features of Gordon Conferences was the near equivalence of speakers and other participants, in contrast with the majority of other meetings, where a small number of speakers in effect address a much larger audience of less eminent researchers.

With the number of speakers now reduced to about half of the former level, there are too few to generate a critical mass of scientists as such or to attract others of equivalent seniority to attend. One consequence is a change in the attitude of the invited speakers, who now treat Gordon Conferences like other meetings, arriving for their talk and departing shortly afterward, instead of staying for much or all of the meeting as used to be the case. Speakers at the beginning and end of the meeting may not even meet. Participants have clearly judged that the relatively low content of information does not justify a one week meeting—a reasonable conclusion when meetings elsewhere present a higher content of data in three days or less. Another consequence is that invitations to more junior researchers to speak have been squeezed out. Also there now seem to be fewer participants from Europe. Another sign of the times is that it used to be difficult for younger scientists to gain admission as participants because of competition from more senior colleagues, but last year the chairman of one meeting that used to be heavily oversubscribed was calling laboratories in the field a week or so before the meeting to beg for graduate students who could come to the meeting to fill the vacant spaces.

The beneficial unique qualities of Gordon Conferences have been lost. (Other unique, but less agreeable, qualities have been retained.) The GRC organization has decided in its wisdom that a meeting should have a vanishingly small number of speakers, ideally consisting of some 2 keynote addresses per session (4 per day), although under pressure they have allowed as many as 4 speakers per morning and 3 per evening. This view represents a misunderstanding of biology that would be comical if it were not tragic. The GRC appears to be under the illusion that more time is needed for "discussion" and less for presentation of data. Perhaps this view is applicable to the

physical sciences, but biology is a field less driven by grand theories and more by data; the strength of the Gordon Conferences in biology has always depended upon the combination of a quality and volume of data to provoke discussion, something that is difficult to achieve with an individual paper. The GRC's concept of "discussion" has as much chance of producing useful results as a scrambled egg has of hatching into a chicken; the GRC fails dismally to realize that discussion cannot be forced, that it is rarely effective in a formal setting with more than 100 participants, and that in any case the most productive discussions often occur outside the formal sessions. The difference in the meetings is dramatic to anyone who has attended Gordon Conferences over the past 10 years, and can compare the former sense of excitement and vitality with the present lackluster atmosphere.

How did this change happen? It has not occurred with the willing participation of the community. Dissatisfaction with the Gordon Conferences has been mounting for years, and there have been continued protests from chairmen of conferences (who after all are elected by the participants), but these have failed to persuade the GRC that its policy is mistaken. A survey of 20 recent chairmen generated 18 responses, of which all but one expressed frustration and despair about the GRC. One chairman commented that: "I have decided that changing the GRC administration is hopeless. They take on an attitude of superior insight when asked to reconsider any point, no matter how minor. My only similar interactions have involved officials of especially conservative religious groups." Both the general problem and the present situation stem from policies initiated under the former Director, Dr. Alexander Cruickshank, but continued faithfully today. A comment from Carlyle B. Storm, the present Director, epitomizes the lack of reality: "The Board has taken a conscious decision to have a meeting format where people can discuss where a field is going and have discussion that will set the future agenda for an area of investigation. When people come to a Gordon Conference, they expect to find that format and register their disappointment if there is a large variation." Indeed people are registering their disappointment—but it is disappointment with the arbitrary format that the GRC has imposed—and they are voting with their feet. The GRC may emulate Nero, and fiddle while the conferences decline, but meanwhile the community is losing an important resource.

Who are the people who have unilaterally decided to wreck the Gordon Conferences in biology? There are three relevant bodies at the GRC. The Board of Trustees includes 13 members, with a mixture of academic and industrial members. The permanent Council has 38 members, all of whom are affiliated with industrial organizations. Among 15 additional members at large, there is only one person with an academic affiliation in biology, and a handful of chemists. The elected chairmen of the individual meetings are nominally members of the Council and can vote on the selection of Trustees; although they do not

usually involve themselves, this is one possible route to change the GRC. The Committee on Selection and Scheduling is divided into three subgroups; clearly the seven members of the biology subgroup are either ignorant of the decline of the meetings or ineffective. Four of the seven are also Trustees, so the same small group of people is involved at both levels of decision. The best service they could perform for the community at this point would be to resign, and to appoint replacements who have a better understanding of the functioning of these meetings in the context of modern biology. (The claim by the GRC Director that "about one third of the members of our Board and the Selection and Scheduling Committee are active in research in the biological sciences" casts an interesting light on what the GRC regards as appropriate research in biology.)

It must be admitted that the GRC has had a success in one regard: it has bamboozled at least some chairmen into believing that a format with only 30 speakers is the "traditional format," but it is significant that these chairmen speak in somewhat despondent tones about their inability to assemble a star cast for their conferences. History has been rewritten, and perhaps soon there will be no one who remembers that Gordon Conferences used to be powerfully different from other meetings. It may be no coincidence that the most successful meetings are those where the chairmen have subverted the wishes of the GRC and have increased the number of speakers, for example, by not counting session chairmen among the speakers although in reality they will give talks with the others. Another ruse is to add speakers later, but this is less effective because they do not appear on the published program.

The Gordon Conferences have been reduced to a status no better than many other quasi-competitive meetings. Furthermore, scientists have put up with the Spartan conditions because of the former prestige of these meetings. But the Gordon Conferences must now survive in an environment of increased competition among meetings, and scientists will not be encouraged to spend a week in uncomfortable surroundings at an indifferent meeting. Without the combination of small overall size, excellent quality of participants, and continuing sense of community that used to be unique to the Gordon Conferences, these meetings will no longer have anything special to offer.

Financial support for the meetings does not come solely from the GRC organization. The GRC usually provides \$15,000 to pay the expenses of speakers at a meeting. At a typical biology meeting, the chairman will often raise more money than this from other sources, such as NIH funding. In such circumstances, what right does the GRC have to restrict the number of speakers?

In recent years, the GRC has taken the unnecessary step of diversifying, by organizing meetings in Italy and Switzerland. These meetings appear usually to be of a lower standard than those held in the United States. Why do the Gordon Conferences in New Hampshire appear always to be short of funds, yet there is money to spend organizing meetings in Tuscany? Would it not be better to concentrate funds to improve the meetings in the U. S., rather than to organize indifferent meetings in Europe? The GRC should address these concerns and inform the community what sums are spent organizing meetings abroad vis-à-vis those in this country, and indeed what are the economics of running the individual meetings. Carlyle B. Storm (the Director) was unavailable to answer questions when this editorial went to press: his office said that he was "away at the GRC site in Italy for several weeks."

It is extraordinary to see a series of meetings that had been regarded as the pinnacle of scientific conferences reduced to a shadow of its former self by such obtuse and rigid behavior. What action can the community take? Complaints could be made to the GRC, petitions could be circulated at meetings, but all of this has been done before. However, chairmen who are elected for future meetings could ask their electorate for a mandate to insist upon a reasonable number of speakers (say, 50–60). (And invited speakers might decline to participate unless included in a session with a sufficient number of other speakers to have real impact.)

The response from the GRC given its past record is likely to be vindictive: to threaten to cancel the meeting or to place it "on probation." However, the chairmen should stand firm in the face of such threats. It is the chairmen, after all, who represent the real community that has supported the Gordon Conferences for years, and they provide the only conduit by which the community can respond to the GRC. There is a short-term risk that the GRC might make good on its bluff and cancel a meeting (although the reduced impact of Gordon Conferences means this is unlikely to be a great loss given the number of other meetings that are now comparable); and in the long run there is much to gain for the entire community if the GRC is compelled by uniform action to restore the former format. The ability of the GRC to divide and rule will be ineffective if the chairmen act in concert. This is really the last chance to rescue the Gordon Conferences for biology. Scientists of the world, unite! These are difficult steps to take, but there is nothing to lose but a week in a summer haven for mosquitoes, sleeping in conditions that are appropriate to reformatories, and eating food that is indescribable in a family journal.